

Fireplace Safety Tips

Fall will soon be here and many of us will be using our fireplaces more regularly. More than one-third of Americans use fireplaces, wood stoves and other fuel-fired appliances as primary heat sources in their homes. Unfortunately, many people are unaware of the fire risks when heating with wood and solid fuels. Heating fires account for 36% of residential home fires in rural areas every year. Often these fires are due to creosote buildup in chimneys and stovepipes. All home heating systems require regular maintenance to function safely and efficiently.

The Installation Safety Office wants to remind fireplace owners that a dirty fireplace is a fire hazard. The ash is actually creosote, which is a flammable carbon deposit that condenses in the flue when the chimney is hot. All it takes is a live ash to land in the right place to ignite the creosote, causing a chimney fire. The fire could quickly reach 2,500 degrees F. As the heat continues to build, the chimney could actually start to melt and the fire can actually be hot enough to melt mortar, bricks, and metal. Within a short time, the entire house could catch fire.

The best method for preventing a fireplace chimney fire is prevention. It is recommended that the chimney be inspected and cleaned after every two cords of wood are burned. If the fireplace is used only occasionally, have it inspected and cleaned every year before use. It is difficult for a homeowner to thoroughly inspect a chimney, but if you decide not to seek professional help, do the inspection yourself. Use a bright flashlight and a mirror to look around the corner created by the smoke ledge, look up into the chimney. If the metal is shiny silver or the ceramic flue liner is bright pink, the chimney is clean. If the inside is black and furry-looking it is time to have the chimney cleaned. While conducting the inspection, check the fire box as well. Check for loose bricks or metal that is thin or warped. If either is found do not use the fireplace until repairs are made.

While conducting the inspection, check the chimney cap. Is it in good working condition? A damaged or missing flue cap will allow objects to come down the chimney and into your home. Rain entering the flue can cause damage. An open chimney is also an invitation for birds and other animals to enter your home. Nests from animals can be very flammable. A properly designed flue cap can also prevent sparks from leaving the chimney and starting a roof fire. Fireplaces are relaxing and fun if taken care of properly.

We encourage you to practice the following fire safety steps to keep those home fires safely burning:

Keep Fireplaces and Wood Stoves Clean

- Have your chimney or wood stove inspected and cleaned annually by a certified chimney specialist.

- Clear the area around the hearth of debris, decorations and flammable materials.
- Always use a metal mesh screen with fireplaces. Leave glass doors open while burning a fire.
- Install stovepipe thermometers to help monitor flue temperatures.
- Keep air inlets on wood stoves open, and never restrict air supply to fireplaces. Otherwise you may cause creosote buildup that could lead to a chimney fire.
- Use fire-resistant materials on walls around wood stoves.

Safely Burn Fuels

- Never use flammable liquids to start a fire.
- Use only seasoned hardwood. Soft, moist wood accelerates creosote buildup.
- Build small fires that burn completely and produce less smoke.
- Never burn cardboard boxes, trash or debris in your fireplace or wood stove.
- When building a fire, place logs at the rear of the fireplace on an adequate supporting grate.
- Never leave a fire in the fireplace unattended. Extinguish the fire before going to bed or leaving the house.
- Soak hot ashes in water and place them in a metal container outside your home.

Protect the Outside of Your Home

- Stack firewood outdoors at least 30 feet away from your home.
- Keep the roof clear of leaves, pine needles and other debris.
- Cover the chimney with a mesh screen spark arrester.
- Remove branches hanging above the chimney, flues or vents.

Protect the Inside of Your Home

- Install smoke alarms on every level of your home and inside and outside of sleeping areas. Test them monthly and change the batteries at least once a year. Consider installing the new long life smoke alarms.
- Provide proper venting systems for all heating equipment.
- Extend all vent pipes at least three feet above the roof.

Another important thing to remember is child safety around fires. Ensure that you childproof your fireplace with a gate or some type of guard to keep the little ones away from the fire and talk to your children about the physical dangers of fires.

Remember, fire safety is your personal responsibility ...Fire Stops with You!